FRIENDSHIP
John 17:1-15
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It was one of the more distressing telephone calls I have received. I did not know the caller and she did not know me. In her words, "You're a preacher aren't you and you're supposed to talk to people, aren't you?" When I indicated that she was correct on both counts the floodgates opened and she told a very sad, but not unusual, story: a teenager, cut off from all contact with her parents, hurt by some very damaging mistakes, trying to make her way in life alone and not doing very well. I did what my training and experience has prepared me to do: I listened. And when she asked directly what I thought she should do, I drew on the resources available to all of us: I suggested making contact with the parents or some family member: I suggested counseling: I pointed her to the myriad of helping institutions in the community. She cut me off in language only the young feel free enough to use with a minister: "The hell with that," she said, "I've heard it all before. I'm just lonely." And then she hung up.

It was a rude reminder that we live in a world where some people are alone. It was a flesh and blood illustration that even in the best of circles, in the midst of cocktail parties and bridge and tennis and dinner at the club there are people - perhaps many people - who need nothing so much as a friend. The academicians who observe us objectively have been saying it for some time. The litany of descriptive words is familiar to all: we are alienated, estranged, cut off, lonely. Our literature betrays us: books sell best that offer some clue to establishing better relationships and if all else fails we are led to the court of final appeal and told how to become "our own best friend". "See all the lonely people - where did they come from?" the Beatles whined a decade ago. And I've never been able to get the phrase out of mind because it's an observation that ministers and doctors and social workers make every day.

Popular wisdom, on the other hand, maintains that distance, not closeness, is the best stance between people. Some sociologists are suggesting that in our culture there are only three kinds of relationships: a sexual relationship, real or imagined or hoped for: a business or functional relationship with persons we need: and acquaintance - that expensive umbrella under which we crowd the casual encounters with neighbors, fellow church members, people we meet on the street or at social gatherings. Absent, say the scholars, is a deep relationship with anyone that might be called friendship. Students of marriage suggest that our culture is so obsessed with sexuality that it never occurs to men and women that they must become friends if they are to make it over the long haul.

I have read and reread Robert Frost's Mending Wall many times. The poem deals with two men replacing stones in the wall that stands between them. Listen to the poet -

"My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"
Mending Wall, The Collected Poems of
Robert Frost, Modern Library, p.35-36).

Close friendship with another human being can be tedious, exasperating, risky. The anonymous neighbor in Frost's poem knew that. It is simply easier not to go too deeply: to keep others safely at arm's length. Don Rickles is poking fun at the late Will Rogers when he says, "I never met a man I couldn't dislike," but he is also saying something profoundly true.

On the other side of it evidence keeps cropping up in our society that the need for friendship is still alive and well. A dear friend of mine who has an important position in educational radio and television, a very sophisticated media expert, once a year, no matter what else is crowding his schedule, pushes everything aside and travels to some remote place for a weekend reunion with his artillery battery from World War II. When I asked him why it was so important he said simply, "They're the best friends I've ever had." There is a lot that is wrong with the Fraternity system: what is right about it is the opportunity for intimate friendship. And in a book on life in the Lowlands of Scotland which I read recently, the author and his wife, after visiting every institution in their village, decided to spend most of their time in the pub because that is where they discovered camaraderie and trust and love. They crossed off the Church, by the way, as the coldest and unfriendliest gathering in Scottish society.

There is no way to read the New Testament without sensing that the Christian Life has everything in the world to do with relationships between people. Christian people are part of a community conspicuous in the eyes of anyone who sees it in the way it exhibits love, forgiveness, acceptance and openness. It is impossible to read the New Testament without seeing that. Yet the simple truth is that it is nearly as impossible to look at the life of the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ and notice it. The greatest discrepancy between what we say we believe and how we act is precisely here. The most damning indictment of the institutional church I know occurs when people find it cold, unfriendly, when it lags behind secular institutions in graciousness and forgiveness and acceptance. And I don't think young people, with their impetuous integrity, will ever take us seriously until we resolve that one.

One of my favorite theologians is Langdon Gilkey, at the University of Chicago. Gilkey spent World War II in a Japanese internment camp, not unlike the one in which Art Romig was held. Gilkey wrote about his experience in an excellent little book Shantung Compound. Space was at a premium in the camp, particularly in the sleeping quarters. Nine, ten and eleven people were housed in rooms ten by eleven feet. Most of them were Christian missionaries, Christian businessmen and wives, teachers and British Government officials. It was impossible for this group to arrive at an equitable and satisfactory allotment of space

"At one point the American Red Cross sent fifteen hundred parcels of food to the camp. The Japanese suggested that one and a half parcels be given to every American prisoner and that one parcel be given to all other prisoners. But the

majority of Americans wanted seven and a half parcels, which was their share if none were given to others. In both instances, as in most other problem times, the problems were solved only by recourse to the power and authority of the Japanese captors." (Shantung Compound, p.34-35).

On the night of His betrayal and arrest Jesus talked to His disciples about the future after He was gone. It is a remarkable passage in which He uses the word "friend" - the only time He used the word in the Gospels. He began His discourse by invoking a very familiar image. When they entered the Temple in Jerusalem they saw the image of a vine on the gates: the vine by which Jeremiah and Ezekiel had described the nation. "I am the vine," He said: "you are the branches." The relationship between us is organic, life and death. And because of that you are related to one another in a dynamic way. As individual branches, with separate functions but equally dependent on Him He called them by a new name: "you are my friends." And then, almost as if He anticipated the fatal misunderstanding that friends of Jesus need no one else He added a new commandment: "Love one another..." "There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends."

That, of course, is precisely what He went out and did. Jurgen Moltmann, perhaps the most widely read contemporary theologian, in his latest book The Church in the Life of the Spirit, suggests that of all the ideas and concepts and images with which we have customarily talked about Jesus, the most dynamic has been neglected. Jesus is a friend. That is to say, even though Presbyterians don't sing it anymore, there may be more theological relevance in the old Gospel Song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" than in a whole library of books on the incarnation. Karl Barth put it simply: "The grace of God to sinful man is that He encounters him as the hearing God; that He calls him not merely to the humility of a servant and the thankfulness of a child but to the intimacy and boldness of a friend." (See Moltmann, p. 110).

What is the thing about which we have been thinking? What did Jesus mean by friendship? He defined it not only verbally but also by the very nature of His relationship with His disciples. Three big ideas emerge immediately. First, self-giving. He called it "laying down one's life" and history is full of noble illustrations: the Marine who saved his companions by falling on a grenade: the chaplains who gave up their life preservers: Mother Maria Pilenko who took the place of a young girl in the line outside the death chamber at Ravensbruck on Good Friday, 1945: and Obi Wan Kenobi in Star Wars who sacrifices self so that his companions may escape. Those are the extraordinary. You and I may never confront the necessity in such dramatic terms. But the fact is we give ourselves, or withhold selves in hundreds of ways every day. Very few of them are clear or spectacular. As a matter of fact, the opportunities sneak up on us. The most common form I know is in the simple effort of a person to share something with us, a joy or a burden or an anxiety or just an opinion tentatively extended. In effect, we are asked to give part of ourselves by listening and internalizing what the other is saying, and to contribute part of our being by trying to feel the joy or hurt or anxiety the other is expressing. Now it's hardly laying down one's life, but it is an opportunity to share a part of one's self for the benefit of the other. But we don't do that very well, do we? Rather, we regard the initiative as a challenge and the name of the game is "Mine is better than yours..." "If you think your back hurts, let me tell you about mine..." "It's nice that Johnny got an A in English, but have I told you about Suzie's Science Award?..." "How nice that you enjoyed New England: we leave Tuesday for London..." "Don't worry about your operation...why the time I had my

gall bladder removed I nearly died..." etc., etc. ad infinitum. Every day we have the opportunity to be a friend by contributing part of ourselves by listening and being there for another.

The first element in the friendship of Jesus was self-giving. The second was acceptance: acceptance of persons as persons apart from what they owned, what they did, or what name society had given them. Recall again that His opponents tried to discredit Him by pointing out that He was "the friend of sinners".

Carlile Marney has added his voice to those suggesting that we are obsessed, in our culture, with a person's function and his or her acquisitions. We become, for all practical purposes, what we do and what we own. He writes, "By and large you have been hiding behind your having and doing: you know you have misused these verbs, and most of us have missed the point. A teenage paraplegic, who has no hands or legs to use, little voice, no way to be mobile, and really almost nothing but a mind, was asked by some ill-made social worker if she wouldn't as soon be done with it all, answered, 'I wouldn't have missed being for anything.'" (Priests to Each Other, p.45).

Jesus cut through all that - all the having of the rich Pharisees and the not-having of the poor man: all the doing of the prostitute and the pious Scribe - and got through to the being - the personhood of the individual child of God, the brother or sister standing in front of Him.

That too is what friendship feels like: self-giving, accepting, and trust, finally. I continue to be impressed with the fact that the friends of Jesus had very little to commend themselves for discipleship. Time and time again they let Him down: they would not understand: as He prepared for death they argued about status: when He was arrested they fled and even while He was being tried in a kangaroo court His best friend Peter was outside lying through his teeth. Even at the moment He was calling them friends one of them was planning to betray Him. He extended confidence and somehow that trust, when they contemplated it later, gave them the strength to live like men - to be brave and honest and faithful to death.

Friendship is a trusting thing although under ordinary circumstances we insist on some demonstration of trust - worthiness before extending it to anyone. "Show that you can be trusted," we say - but it rarely works - with spouses, or children, or friends. Jesus suggested that trust begets trustworthiness: that friendship means taking a risk in seeing more in others than they are able to see in themselves.

Self-giving, acceptance, trust add up to friendship as it was extended by Jesus Christ. And it comes into focus here, in the church, where we invoke His name. Being a "friendly church" sounds almost like a cliche, a gimmick. It is not that at all. It is what we are about.

One writer comments: "We belong to Christ by belonging to each other... We have no choice in the matter. Some of our brothers we may like; others we may dislike. But they belong to us, and we belong to them. Through them we move closer to Him...We belong to Christ only by belonging to each other." (Robert Raines, Reshaping the Christian Life, p.17).

"Through them we move closer to Him." That's how important all of this is. I confess that it took me years to learn it. In the tiny, small town church where I began my ministry the most important events on the church calendar were not Christmas and Easter, but the Women's Bazaar and the Men's Spaghetti Dinner. What a shock to discover that the saints were so profane: that they preferred fooling around with white elephants to listening to my scholarly homilies on incarnational theology, or spaghetti and meat balls to my exposition of atonement. God bless them for teaching me - "Through them we move closer to Him."

In the final analysis the Good News, the love of God in Jesus Christ is just an idea in the mind until it is felt, experienced and made personally real. In some circles it is an event, a soul shattering, emotional upheaval. In other circles it is a seminar topic to be discussed. Missing from both is the simple New Testament reality that people experience the love of God when they learn to love one another.

The miracle of the incarnation becomes important when it happens in us. The idea takes on flesh when Christian people learn to give themselves, accept and trust one another.

It is all, finally, that we have to offer the world. We are the vehicle, the model, the community of those whose friendship is right here for the whole world to see.

Let's not be guilty of hiding that from a world so desperately in need. In fact, let's not deprive ourselves of the saving love of God which we are privileged to give to one another.

> "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. You are my friends if you do what I command you."
>
> Amen.

Father, teach us to love - give us the strength to love as You loved us. Help us to learn the grace of self-giving and accepting and trusting - so that others may see Your love in us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.